SYMPHONY CONCERT—"The composer of our century has added a new dimension to musical art. Because of him music behaves differently. Whatever else it may be, it is the voice of our age."

Modern Music: 'Fresh and Different'

Contemporary music, says a composer, explores new realms and yet remains the expression of basic human emotions. Such an art form will always endure.

ants, a critic. The Times Magazine asked Mr. Pleasants to sum up the argument of his book and asked Aaron Copland, a contemporary composer, to present the case for the defense. Here are the results.

By AARON COPLAND

MUSICAL composition during the first half of our century was vigorously alive partly because of the amount of controversy it was able to arouse. As the century advanced the noise of battle receded until by now we had reluctantly come to assume that the good fight for the acceptance of modern music was over. It was welcome news, therefore, to hear that a rear-guard attack was about to be launched from what used to be a main source of opposition: the professional music critic. It looked as if we were in for some old-fashioned fisticuffs; but the nature of the attack soured our expectations. The trouble is that, according to his own analysis, Henry Pleasants is pummeling nothing but a carcass.

He contends that so-called classical music is bankrupt in our age—the old forms of symphony and concerto and opera are exhausted, all our vaunted innovations are old hat and the serious composer is obsolete. The present-day writer of serious music is held up to view as a sort of musical parvenu, incapable of earning a living through musical composition, skulking the concert halls for musical crumbs, sought after by none, desperately trying to convince himself that he is rightful heir to the heritage of the masters, and deluding public and critics alike into conferring upon him a spurious respectability for "culture's" sake. The clear implication is that the best we can do is to lie down and die.

BUT if all is lost for us, the serious composers, music itself goes on, Mr. Pleasants tells us. It is vox populi, as expressed at the box office, that shows the way. Fearlessly and logically pursuing his argument to its absurd conclusion, he asserts that the stream of Western musical culture continues triumphantly in the music of our popular composers. "Jazz is modern music—and nothing else is." So ends the most confused book on music ever issued in America.

The question arises as to whether it serves any purpose to attempt a defense of serious contemporary music. I hold to the simple proposition that the only way to comprehend a "difficult" piece of abstract sculpture is to keep looking at it, and the only way to understand "difficult" modern music is to keep listening to it. (Not all of it is difficult listening, by the way.) For that reason it seems basically useless to explain the accomplishments of present-day music to people who are incapable of getting any excitement out of it.

If you hear this music and fail to realize that it has added a new dimension to Western musical art, that it has a power and tension and expressiveness typically twentieth-century in quality, that it has overcome the rhythmic inhibitions of the nineteenth century and added complexes of chordal progressions never before conceived, that it has invented subtle or brash combinations of hitherto unheard timbres, that it offers new structural principles that open up vistas for the future—I say, if your pulse remains steady at the contemplation of all this and if listening to it does not add up to a fresh and different musical experience for you, then any defense of mine, or of anybody else, can be of no use whatsoever.

The plain fact is that the composer of our century has earned the right to be considered a master of new sonorous images. Because of him music behaves differently, its textures are different—more crowded or more spacious, it sings differently, it rears itself more suddenly and plunges more precipitously. It even stops differently. But it shares with older music the expression of basic human emotions, even though at times it may seem more painful, more nostalgic, more obscure, more hectic, more sarcastic. Whatever else it may be, it is the voice of our own age and in that sense it needs no apology.

THIS is the music that we are told nobody likes. But let's take a closer look at "nobody." There is general agreement that new multitudes have come to serious music listening in the past two or three decades. Now we are faced with a situation long familiar in the literary world; namely, the need to differentiate clearly among the various publics available to the writer. No publisher of an author-philosopher like Whitehead would expect him to reach the enormous public of a novelist like Hemingway. Ought we then to say "nobody" reads Whitehead?

In music, we (Continued on Page 88)

forum he and his fellows present a united front to the nonprofessional musical world and claim for themselves the right to decide what is music and what is not.

THE history of music in any civilization, including our own, is the history of music that people like. Its history is determined not by composers and critics but by lay listeners. True, it is the composer, not the listener, who produces new ideas. This is why great innovators among the composers, such as Beethoven, Berlioz and Wagner, are thought of as influencing and even determining the course of musical history. But this overlooks the fact that their new ideas are valid only in so far as they are acceptable to the listening public. Thus, in the wider sense, it is the public that determines the course of evolution of rendering its verdict as to which among any number of new ideas it finds to its tastes.

It is odd that modern composers have not understood this because the traditions they seek to perpetuate were all shaped in their own time by demand. And the composers know it. The same men who propagate the legend that contemporary music is never appreciated in its own time insist upon upbraiding contemporary audiences for not having the thirst for new music that audiences had in the time of Bach, Haydn, and Mozart.

This habit of criticizing audiences instead of music has made the contemporary composer what he is today: a pathetic figure seeking to shape the music of his generation while all around him the music of his generation is spontaneously and irresistibly taking place.

FOR the past fifty years music has been experiencing the most profound and fundamental evolutionary upheaval since 1600. It is not the change from a tonal to an atonal language, nor the return to old models and old concepts represented by neoclassicism.

It is rather the change from a music based on theme and harmony to a music based on melody and rhythm. It has taken place, not in serious music, but in popular music. And it has taken place, not because some composer or group of composers decided it ought to take place, but because society willed that it should take place.

The evolutionary status of jazz may be understood by thinking of the nineteenth-century epoch as a main stream flowing confidently through a luxuriant valley—into a swamp. Modern music may then be understood as the effort of an enfeebled current to escape stagnation.

Continuing the metaphor, jazz may be thought of as a current that bubbled forth from a spring in the slums of New Orleans to become the main stream of the twentieth century. In less than fifty years it has flooded the United States and most of the rest of the world.

To put it briefly, the most important phenomenon of musical evolution occurred: a style was born.

A STRONG style, like a strong current, absorbs every inferior stream that crosses its path. The proofs of strength lie in the fact of absorption. In music today the fact is manifest. Jazz can absorb any of the technical devices of modern music without seeming to imitate. Modern music can absorb none of the musical characteristics of jazz without immediately sounding like an imitation of jazz.

This is difficult for the composer, the historian and the critic to understand. For all of them evolution implies continuity, and in relating jazz to the evolution of Western music the continuity is not immediately apparent. Even to the musicologist the superficial contrasts are so vivid that they tend to blot out the more important fundamental similarities.

The elements of continuity, however, are conclusive. The musical materials are the same, although differently employed. The scales are the same, and the manner in which melodies are derived from the scales is the same, whatever superficial differences there may be in the actual character and mood of the melodies.

IF one looks back beyond the nineteenth century, the position of jazz within the framework of Western musical evolution becomes clear enough. Even as late as Beethoven, improvisation was fashionable among composers, and was one of the standard features of their appearances as soloists. Certainly many of their compositions should be thought of as the written record of an improvisation refined by critical afterthought.

Improvisation in jazz is, to be sure, more of a communal proposition. In this respect it [illegible] the virtuoso improvisations of a Bach, a Buxtehude, a Mozart, a Clementi, or a Beethoven as the eighteenth century concerto grosso.

In a real jam session the alternation of solos, small solo groups, and full band occur at the whim of the players. In an arrangement it occurs according to a plan, inspired, likely as not, by previous improvisation, and worked out with the men who do the playing. If the concerto grosso did not originate in precisely this manner, its character and purpose were the same. As with the jam session, the players rather than the composer or arranger were regarded as the heroes of the piece, and the purpose was to give good players something new and good to play.

A similar parallel exists with respect to liberties. The

serious musician who takes liberties with the score is considered an infidel. The jazz musician who does not is considered a dolt. This was true, generally, of European music as late as the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Most composition in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries left a good deal to the performer's imagination and discretion.

THUS the jazz accomplishment is simply defined. It has taken music away from the composers and given it back to musicians and their public. The simplicity sought by serious composers through intellectual and technical experimentation has been achieved by practicing musicians guided by popular taste. Because of popular guidance their product is culturally valid. Because of the absence of popular guidance, the accomplishment of the serious composers is not.

This is obviously something the serious composer cannot admit, even to himself. He is fated to go on writing sonatas, symphonies, and operas as long as society as a whole continues to believe that these old forms and the symphony orchestra have a monopoly on respectability and cultural superiority. But he may be seen late at night making his way from Carnegie Hall to the livelier blandishments of a jam session.

For down deep in his heart he knows that jazz is modern music—and that nothing else is!